

Chapter 4

Leaving Husserl's Cave? The Philosopher's Shadow Revisited

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Abstract: Despite the claim by contemporary commentators that Merleau-Ponty ignores the transcendental perspective of Husserlian phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty's final essay on Husserl, "Le Philosophe et son ombre," is engaged in reformulating the relation between the transcendental and the mundane. The necessity for this reformulation lies in his reconsideration of the Cartesianism underlying his earlier appropriation of the phenomenological method. Merleau-Ponty's later formulation of the reduction, I contend, is a historical retrieval of Platonic dialectic by way of a re-reading of the myth of the cave.

Why should we bother reading Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Husserl today? It is well known that Merleau-Ponty's most enthusiastic claims about the turn toward existentialism in Husserl's *Krisis* and later manuscripts have not been borne out; that in the early days of Husserl scholarship, the reports of those few who had visited the archives were greeted with more incredulity than is appropriate today, as more and more volumes of Husserl's own writings are available for purchase or for perusal at our local libraries; and that, perhaps more importantly, careful Husserl scholarship has demonstrated, as one recent commentator remarked, that "Husserl's was from about 1905 through to the end of his life a transcendental philosophy," while "existential phenomenology is not transcendental."¹ For all intents and purposes, this solves any philosophical questions that might be raised for Husserl by Merleau-Ponty. We know in advance both the error to be expected here and the prescribed cure.

But of course it is out of no mere sense of duty to correct a misreading that we find this interpretation of Husserl interesting today; our interest

1. Lester Embree, "Foreword," in *An Introduction to Husserlian Phenomenology*, ed. Rudolf Bernet, Iso Kern, and Eduard Marbach (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), xi.

stems rather from the recognition that we are implicated and invested in the issue of this reading. As phenomenologists, our identity and philosophical practice are themselves at stake in the definition of phenomenology. Therefore, as Merleau-Ponty recognized, we cannot so easily draw the line between investigations of intellectual history and philosophical methodology as such. Perhaps Husserl had overlooked this point in believing that future generations of phenomenologists would go straight to the things themselves rather than poring over his old papers: text scholarship, here as elsewhere in recent philosophy, is not simply a matter of finding inspiration or interesting points of departure: it is a labor by which our own philosophical identities and allegiances are made, broken, and reformed—at least if we can read with an open mind.

In fact, Husserl considers examination of the history of philosophy to be crucial for responding to the crisis of rationality in his time, which undoubtedly holds true for our time as well: “we must engross ourselves in historical considerations if we are to be able to understand ourselves as philosophers and understand what philosophy is to become through us.”² The issues raised by our attempt to read Merleau-Ponty reading Husserl today are the same issues at stake in Husserl’s later reflections on the history and *telos* of European philosophy: the relationship between phenomenology and tradition, the necessity of reading and writing and their concomitant forms of sedimentation and reactivation, the possibility of self-presence, the viability of the assumption that every description can be checked against the original through a simple return to the matter itself. If thinking were truly a frictionless machine, the aims of phenomenological practice would be both obvious and achieved effortlessly, with no need for recourse to the writings of others or to writing of our own—with no need, that is, for memory or tradition. Must we not, as phenomenologists, account in some way for what within us resists thought, what resists phenomenology, what makes our thinking both necessary and possible while simultaneously setting out its limits? If there is any need for a “tradition” of phenomenology, any need for

2. Husserl, Beilage XXVIII, in *Die Krisis der Europäischen Wissenschaften und die Transzendente Phänomenologie*, Husserliana, vol 6, ed. W. Biemel (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976) [cited hereafter as Hua VI]; “Denial of Scientific Philosophy. Necessity of Reflection. The Reflection [Must Be] Historical. How is History Required?”, Appendix IX, in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 391 [cited hereafter as *Crisis*].

reading Husserl rather than rushing out on our own into the obvious light of the matters themselves, this need is precisely an example of phenomenology's possibilities and its limits. It is precisely those slippages and resistances which make a tradition possible that are at stake in Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl and that are at stake in reading both today. Rather than dismissing such "contingency" as an undesirable consequence of embodiment or finitude, the standard response of the tradition from Plato through the Enlightenment, Merleau-Ponty tries to account for this contingency by means of the one philosophical method with the potential, in his opinion, for bringing it into the open: phenomenology.

Our reading of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty today cannot help but be reactive: having read them and read about them, we now form our view within the context of the surrounding "debate"; we anticipate and look for clues to confirm our expectations. Anyone reading our reactions and not aware of this ongoing discussion would very likely get a misleading impression of both philosophers. The same point must be made with respect to Merleau-Ponty's own reading: each of his published discussions of Husserl is already clearly marked as a reaction to views well-known at the time and is presented in most cases as a defense of Husserl against his critics. This is already true of Merleau-Ponty's 1936 review of Sartre's *L'Imagination*, of the Preface to *Phénoménologie de la perception*, and even of "Le Philosophe et son ombre," Merleau-Ponty's last published discussion of Husserl, which is clearly put forward to weigh in against "the 'transcendental' Husserl, the one who is at present being solemnly installed in the history of philosophy."³ In fact, it seems likely that Merleau-Ponty's essay is in part a response to Ricoeur's analysis of *Ideen II*, in which Ricoeur insistently and repeatedly underlines the differences between Husserl's transcendental method and the approach of such "existential phenomenologists" as Gabriel Marcel and Merleau-Ponty. In Ricoeur's words, Husserl "does not dream of a fusion of the transcendental and the objective within an ambiguous experience which somehow holds them in an

3. *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 203; *Signs*, trans. Richard McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 160 [cited hereafter as S, with French preceding English pagination].

irresolvable suspension.”⁴ If these words had been written after “Le Philosophe et son ombre,” we would have no option but to read them as an objection to Merleau-Ponty’s approach. But since they were published eight years before, we are forced to confront the fact that Merleau-Ponty made his claims not only despite Ricoeur’s warning, but boldly in the face of it. Merleau-Ponty was well aware of the argument we make so glibly, thirty years later, to dismiss his “existentialist” misinterpretation of the transcendental project; and “Le Philosophe et son ombre” was probably written as his response to this very same dismissal.

But “Le Philosophe et son ombre” is also the culmination of a turn in Merleau-Ponty’s own thinking about Husserl, reflected in his writings about Husserl over the course of the several previous years and building toward his critique of Husserl in the “Reflection and Interrogation” chapter of *Le Visible et l’invisible*. Merleau-Ponty’s strategy in “Le Philosophe et son ombre” is linked to his turn away from the Cartesian understanding of phenomenology that had dominated his own earlier work. Rather than defending a “phenomenological positivism,” he is now explicitly seeking the limits of phenomenology, the borders it shares with non-phenomenology—not by rejecting the necessity of transcendental thinking, but precisely by pushing it to its limits.

But pushing phenomenology to its limits also requires an archeology of its past, a determination of its historical *telos*. In order to circumscribe the limits of Enlightenment rationality and retrieve a more fundamental *telos* of European philosophy, Husserl returned to what was, for him, the founding moment of our philosophical heritage: Plato’s reorientation toward the infinite.⁵ Following Husserl’s lead, Merleau-Ponty’s model for the transcendental reduction, in “Le Philosophe et son ombre” and his later lecture courses on Husserl, is less the Cartesian doubt than the Platonic dialectic. To return to a point prior to—or move beyond—reflective

4. Paul Ricoeur, “Husserl’s *Ideas II*: Analyses and Problems” in *Husserl: An Analysis of his Phenomenology*, trans. Edward G. Ballard and Lester E. Embree (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967), 67. See also Ricoeur’s explicit remarks about the distinction between transcendental and existential phenomenological approaches on 43, 48, and 52. This essay first appeared as “Analyses et problèmes dans ‘Ideen II’ de Husserl,” *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, n. 56 (October–December, 1951): 357–94, and n. 57 (January–March, 1952): 1–16.

5. See Husserl, *Abhandlung III*, Hua VI; “The Vienna Lecture,” Appendix I of *Crisis*.

philosophy of the Cartesian variety, one must rethink the Platonic roots of the distinction between exterior and interior, mundane and transcendental, fact and essence. Pushing phenomenology to its limits, therefore, requires a reevaluation of that inherently chiaroscuro origin of Western thought, the shadowy cave.

I. Merleau-Ponty's Cartesian Progression

Due, perhaps, to the cultural and linguistic accessibility of Husserl's *Cartesianische Meditationen*, Merleau-Ponty's early interpretation of the transcendental reduction was profoundly influenced by the Cartesian approach to phenomenology.⁶ In consequence, his early appropriation of phenomenology sought to restore something of an ontological progression after a radicalized Cartesian doubt. This ontological reinterpretation of the transcendental reduction underlies the conception of "phenomenological positivism" championed during the period of *Phénoménologie de la perception*.

In *Cartesianische Meditationen*, suspension of belief in the external world leads us to the "phenomenological epochē," which is another way of saying that doubt returns us to the purified cogito, but a cogito that, on Husserl's description, includes the entire universe, just as before, now as the correlate of my subjective processes, i.e., "purely as meant in them."⁷ At this point, it becomes clear that the world is originally nothing other than a world *as experienced* by my cogito: "By my living, by my experiencing, thinking, valuing, and acting, I can enter no world other than the one that gets its sense and acceptance or status in and from me, myself" (Hua I 60/CM 21). Since all possible positings of the world must find their source within my *cogitationes*, the distinction between the world-as-phenomenon and the

6. It bears mentioning both that Merleau-Ponty had attended the original "Paris Lectures" and that *Méditations cartésiennes* (trans. Gabrielle Pfeiffer and Emmanuel Levinas [Paris: Armand Collin, 1931]) remained the only major text by Husserl to appear in French until the 1950 publication of Paul Ricoeur's translation of Husserl's *Ideen I* (in the Gallimard series directed by Merleau-Ponty and Sartre).

7. *Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge*, Husserliana, vol. 1, 2nd ed., ed. Stephen Strasser (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963), 60 [cited hereafter as Hua I]; *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. Dorion Cairns (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993), 20 [cited hereafter as CM].

Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl

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